

Mermaids: The Body Found Q&A

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It took five years to give birth to a mermaid.

Charlie Foley, Animal Planet's senior vice president of development, took half a decade creating, developing, writing and executive producing "Mermaids: The Body Found", a two-hour special that combines cutting edge Computer-Generated Imagery with real events.

Q: You probably could have cranked it out in about a year, but you didn't do that?

A: Actually, you're right, that's about the timeline for a standard cg film. It's funny, one of the fellas that worked with me on the film said, 'My God, Charlie, you've had Mermaids longer than you've had your kids.'

Q: Watching this film it made me think of Area 51 and aliens. How did you get this idea?

A: It began a few years ago. I wrote and executive produced a two-hour film for Animal Planet on dragons. Imagining dragons as real animals. Using real science to imagine them. It did really well so we wanted to do another one.

And I got thinking about mermaids and the question whether they could be real. And if you look, every seafaring culture on Earth has a mermaid legend, including cultures that never had contact with one another. They all have the same stories. They all depict the creatures similarly. That's intriguing. Could this have evolved and how would it have happened? And that's sort of the leading question.

In the theory of human evolution there's this pretty radical theory called the aquatic ape theory.

The fact is there are animals that have moved from the land into the sea. Could it have happened to humans? And with aquatic ape theory, if there's anything to it, what is the logical extension of it if we continued going in that direction. The idea is that people pulled back and we stopped evolving into a marine animal, into an aquatic animal. But what if we kept going? And that to me, knowing that it's happened before knowing that it's real science with other animals. Could it have happened with one branch of the human family tree?

Could there actually be a scientific grounding to this legend?

I don't think there are a lot of stories, not to my knowledge anyway, that imagine where they came from and how they would have come into being. And what their natural history would be like and I don't think there's another imagination of them as a member of the human family tree.

Q: People are going to think [the actors in this story] are real and that this really happened. So is this based on something? Are there really any photos?

A: Look at the deep oceans, the fact is the surface of the moon has been explored more than our oceans.

And in the past 10 years, there's mention made of this in the film and it's true, there's been two new species of whale found. The largest species on Earth brand new to science identified for the first time and that's the last decade plus. So there is still a real question as to what else is out there because we're still finding things.

Mermaid sightings continue to this day. For example, in Israel there's a town [Kiryat Yam] and they have a standing bounty of I think a million dollars for evidence of a mermaid. People in the town have reported seeing [them], this is entirely true by the way, they've reported seeing them for the past 10 years.

So the idea that it is possible, that evolutionarily, scientifically, it is plausible. Humans are fascinated by the idea that there could be a kernel of truth in a legend and the story design here is to look at that and imagine that and imagine in a way where how would this really have happened.

Q: Do you think it would be fair to call this a work of fiction based on fact?

A: Maybe that's a good consideration. It is certainly using real science to inform, to ground the story and as a springboard into imagination and into the story. Certainly it's girded by a lot of fact and the story does intersect with real-world phenomena, real-world events, real science.

Q: Have you seen the Harry Potter movies? Do you realize your mermaids look a little like the merpeople from the Black Lake?

A: Those mermaids still have hair, which would be one of the first things to go if you really were evolving to a marine animal. It's one of the reasons in the aquatic ape theory that accounts for why we're relatively hairless compared to other primates.

[Our mermaid's] tail is paddle shaped, it's not horizontal like a shark's tail like in the Harry Potter films. It's more paddle shaped because that would be how the foot bones would have radiated out. We spent a lot of time scientifically imagining how the creatures would look and even their color, for instance. These don't look like what you expect mermaids to look like. They're blue on the back and they have pale bellies, that's something called counter shading. A lot of marine animals have it, whales, a great white shark has it very dramatically. It's a form of camouflage.

Q: What do you want people to take away from watching this?

A: [I'd like them to] wonder about what else is out there. What is possible? If this were real how would it have come into being. Here's one of our oldest myths, I hope, imagined in a way that hasn't been done before and as a member of our own family tree. And is that possible and is that done more compellingly and credibly because it's drawing upon real-world phenomena, real science. First and foremost, I want to entertain people. And I do hope they wonder at it and have moments of wonder.

Q: When I first watched it I wondered what's the Navy doing and I Googled the mass whale beachings. It all seemed very real.

A: Hopefully, it feels real because it's inspired by real events. The Navy really has beached whales testing sonar. There was, in fact, a beaching in Washington State. NOAA is the agency that investigates this. I hope that specificity is what makes good storytelling and makes it very credible.

Q: Do you think it will make people question?

A: People love story and people love imagination and myth and legend but people also love realism and truth being stranger than fiction.

Q: I don't know if you've ever read Dan Brown's books [The Da Vinci Code], in a way it kind of made me think of that. Maybe these things could have happened? How much is real?

A: This goes to your Area 51 analogy and you're dead right, because that was absolutely one of the touchstones I was thinking about when I started this.

The government and the military industrial complex is a very sort of cliché and easy villain. What does Big Brother know, what's being hidden from us? Now this case draws a little more realism because the Navy really has done this and for a long time they tried to cover it up. That's kind of like Area 51 suddenly you do start to ask questions because there has been some weird behavior.

Q: The bloop is real, the mass whale beachings are real. It really makes you think what else is really going on?

A: Even at the end of the film with dolphins cooperatively hunting with fisherman. That is also real and scientists have no idea where it came from. It's one of the inexplicable partnerships on earth, the origins of it. How on earth did that get started?

Q: I had not heard about the aquatic ape theory before, but like with the Dan Brown comparison, you may be putting out a hypothesis on something but there's a reality base behind it.

A: You know we're all fascinated by our own origins and I think [the aquatic ape theory] is a particularly fascinating theory because it accounts for the differences between humans and other primates.

To begin with we can consciously hold our breath longer than any other terrestrial animal by a country mile. Human babies instinctively hold their breath in the dive reflex.

Then we have an inflating fat layer. The only other animals that have the kind of fat layer that we do, all over the body, are exclusively marine mammals.

And we're hairless and hair creates drag in water.

So this film should get people thinking and talking. Is that what you want?

A: [I hope] that it entertains as well as engages people and makes people wonder.